

Opinion: An inalienable right

The question 'Who owns my life?' lies at the heart of the voluntary euthanasia debate. Some believe that our lives are not wholly our own, in so far as God has determined when and how they shall end. Although we may legitimately prolong life, we may not terminate it. There are others who are anti-choice, who want our lives to be regulated for us, because we cannot be trusted to exercise sensible control over our life. Their condition has been described in a book by the psychiatrist - philosopher Erich Fromm titled 'The Fear of Freedom'. Such views are unacceptable to proponents of personal autonomy, who hold that we are free to make decisions affecting our lives, provided only that we do not use that freedom to harm others.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights speaks of an 'inalienable right to life'. If I have such a right - and I firmly believe that I have - then it is a right that I cannot transfer to others, nor can they take it from me. Through that right I have ownership over my life, how I choose to live and how to die. Strangely, that very declaration has been interpreted by some as denying our ownership, as if it were life itself, rather than the right to it, that is inalienable. Without freedom of choice we cease to be humans and become things - objects, not subjects. The most precious possession a human being can claim is that of his or her own person, and that must include the right of self-determination writes Marilynne Seguin in her book 'Gentle Death'.

When we examine the rational grounds for opposing voluntary euthanasia, we find that much of the debate, although supposedly about moral values, is actually a dispute about facts: as to what voluntary euthanasia is, or implies, or would lead to. In matters of life and death, it is not hard to conjure up scary scenarios. Although there is no hard evidence to support these, there is only their implausibility to refute them, so they easily arouse fear in the public imagination. Fear then overrides both reason and compassion.

We are immensely compassionate towards animals other than ourselves, not only our pets, but any who strike us having sensibilities - dolphins and whales, for example. We condemn those who cause them needless suffering, we expend time and money to save them from harm, we end their lives swiftly and painlessly if we cannot relieve their distress in any other way. So why are we so reluctant to extend such compassion to one another, granted they are far better endowed than other animals with independence of mind; self-awareness; and the power to communicate our wishes - and we probably have a greater capacity to suffer?

Modern technology can prolong our dying almost indefinitely, allowing death to occur, as someone has remarked, 'by the cruelty of nature when the skill of the doctor fails'. The case for voluntary euthanasia rests on respect for human autonomy, on respect for the ownership of one's life, measured in terms of human identity and dignity, and on compassion for needless, unwanted distress in dying.

When the preservation of life is no longer compatible with the relief of suffering and the patient wishes only to die, the medical profession is faced with a moral dilemma unknown to a veterinarian. Only a change in the law can allow both doctor and patient to resolve that dilemma.

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